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ABSTRACT

The concept of the learning community and the transition of both students and teachers to the teaching/learning relationship has become a focus of graduate programs at Heritage College (Toppenish, Washington). The mission of Heritage is to provide quality, accessible higher education to a multicultural population which has been educationally isolated. In a major reorganization of the graduate program in the early 1990s a conscious effort was made to craft a mission congruent with Heritage's undergraduate program. A site-based model was developed using a targeted cadre organization that allowed groups of about 25 students each to meet in school-based classes that remained together for approximately 2 years. The graduate faculty collaborated on identifying valued outcomes to guide the content of the courses. The eight identified outcomes reflected the mission of the college. Now students enter a program where they are expected to: (1) assess resource materials and persons; (2) analyze critical issues in the evaluation of diverse populations; (3) articulate a personal framework for professional growth; (4) link multicultural theory and practice; (5) demonstrate problem-solving ability; (6) exhibit effective social interaction; (7) communicate effectively in both oral and written presentations; and (8) demonstrate self-reflection. (Contains 20 references.) (JB)

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AN INTERNAL JOURNEY OF THE HEART: BUILDING COMMUNITY And AN EMPOWERMENT MODEL OF GRADUATE EDUCATION THROUGH DIVERSITY

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Building Community and Implementing An Empowerment Model of Graduate Education

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It was noon on Sunday and the last few moments of a course in a Master of Education program. The sun was shining brightly outside and the students were looking forward to a pleasant half day of ease after a week of wretched weather. Smaller than the usual 30 or so students, this class had only seven, some of whom just beginning their degree program. The students had filled out the evaluation for the instructor and were discussing their perceptions of this learning experience.

"This was my first class and I'm so glad it wasn't large. I didn't know if I could do this, and now I know I can. It was such a positive experience, " declared Susan, a mid-level administrator in a local school district.

Juana quickly replied, "Oh, Susan, even in large classes at this college -and the largest I've been in had 30 - we're still able to have the closeness and the sharing we've experienced in this class. That's the way things are here."

"You bet," enjoined Pete, "We always work in small groups, work together and get to know each other pretty well."

"What I really like," interjected Alice, "Is that in this program I haven't experienced any putdowns in class and the faculty members always have time for me. Elsewhere, it's been 'See me during my office hours or I won't be able to meet with you.'"

"You bet," chimed in Juana, "When I began my other Master's Degree (in another field), the Dean walked in the first day and told us, 'We're not here to hold your hand. If you can't cut it, you don't belong here.' And out of 97 people who started the program, only 52 of us walked across the stage at graduation. It's not like that here. I earned my B.A. here and I didn't appreciate it until I went elsewhere."

Pam, the instructor, joined in. " Actually, Susan, the faculty here are very committed to building community in our courses. We believe that students have a great deal to offer each other and we have confidence that we can all join together to create a community of scholars in our classes. By building on everyone's strengths, we're all enriched ."

##

The foregoing vignette paints a scenario indicating the positive effects on both student affect and learning that can occur in a community building learning model. There is a rich body of literature (Leigh Smith, 1993; Tinto, Love & Russo, 1994; Gabelnick, MacGregor, & Leigh

Smith, 1990; Katz, 1987 and others) describing the design, development, and significance of learning communities in higher education. The focus of this paper, however, is not on building a total campus-wide learning community, but on the strategies for doing so within the context of a single course.

Finkel and Monk (1983) discuss the "Atlas complex" among professors, i.e. that one sees oneself as primarily responsible for the learning that occurs in one's class. They suggest that one need not labor on, bearing full responsibility for instruction and propose an alternative based on the class as a social system that focuses on teaching functions instead of teaching roles. This model transforms all the players from the rigid and somewhat stifling dyadic relationship based on roles of "teacher" and "student(s)", or "leader" and "follower(s)". The restructured relationship enables students to assume some of the teaching functions the teacher would traditionally perform.

Successful implementation of this approach requires, like any meaningful instruction, planning. In designing a course, the instructor must begin to think about how to free him/herself from the norms associated with being "teacher." And the instructor must expect that, at first, some students may perceive the new approach to teaching and learning as a strategy for the teacher to "relax and let students do all the work." Nothing could be farther from the truth when "Atlas shrugs.".

Building community requires a commitment to sharing responsibility with students as well as a rich and diverse repertoire of teaching strategies, among them facilitating collaborative learning, problem posing, framing higher order questions, and grouping strategies. Leigh Smith and MacGregor (1993) have identified a number of collaborative learning strategies described in the following table:

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Strategy	Characteristics
Cooperative Learning	**- Based on social interdependence theories** **- Small groups of students work together to maximize their own and others' learning** **- Structured around precisely defined tasks or problems** **- Positive interdependence is essential** **- Students relate constructively** **- Careful attention given to individual accountability and responsibility** **- Interpersonal skills as important as the learning task** **- Ongoing debriefing important**
Problem-Centered Instruction	**- Develop problem solving abilities,**

	understanding complex relationships, and decision making
. Guided Design	**. Students make decisions about large, open-ended problem in sequenced steps**
. Cases	**. A story or narrative of a real-life situation that is left open-ended for solution**
. Simulations	**. Complex scenarios that emulate real-life experiences** **. Requires students to take a perspective** **. Fosters reflection**
Writing Groups	**- Uses writing as social process** **- Relies on peer review**
Peer Teaching	**- Students teaching fellow students**
Discussion Groups/Seminars	**- Students and instructor conduct a discourse on a given topic, problem, or issue** **- Students and teacher seek mutual understanding through collaboration**

##

In the realm of ideas, the concept of the learning community is a powerful one. Instead of students being passive receptacles of knowledge, students become creators of their own learning (Knoop, 1995; Mears & Voehl, 1994). The instructor,too, undergoes a metamorphosis, becoming a co-creator of knowledge -a colleague rather than a conduit of information. This transition of both parties to the teaching/learning relationship (Heneveld & Craig, 1995; O'Neil, 1995; Senge, 1990) has become a focus of graduate programs at Heritage College in Toppenish, Washington.

The mission of Heritage College is to provide quality, accessible higher education to a multicultural population which has been educationally isolated. The College attempts to live its motto "Knowledge Brings Us together" by placing great importance on the dignity and potential of each student and by considering diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds as assets to the educational process. The student body has significant populations of Native Americans, Hispanics primarily of Mexican origin, and Caucasians, as well as Asians, African Americans, and international students.

The philosophy and objectives of the Division of Education and Psychology at Heritage College are based on two concepts: the inherent worth of every individual and the crucial role of education in the devlopment of that individual. Through participation in the programs of the Division, students are encouraged to strengthen positive values which cross cultural barriers and enhance the quality of life.

Historically, the graduate programs at Heritage College have had an unsure self image in relation to the rest of the College's programs. The mission of the college, "to provide quality, accessible, higher education to the multicultural population that has been educationally isolated", seemed to be based on undergraduate, primarily minority students whose incomes were at or below the poverty level. Students in graduate programs appeared on the surface to be more economically secure and considerably more "Anglo". While graduate programs provided substantial institutional funding, they seemed not to reflect the high ideals of the institution's mission.

In a major reorganization of the graduate programs in the early 1990's, a conscious effort was made by the Graduate Council to craft a mission congruent with the nationally acclaimed undergraduate program. A number of components were designed to achieve this goal.

A site-based model was developed in graduate education using a targeted cadre organization. The format allowed groups of about 25 students to meet in school-based classes that would remain together for approximately two years, taking their courses together on weekends and during the summer.

The graduate faculty collaborated on identifying valued outcomes to guide the content of the courses. The eight valued outcomes assure that, upon finishing their graduate degrees, students will:

1. Assess resource materials and persons;
2. Analyze critical issues in the evaluation of diverse populations;
3. Articulate a personal framework for professional growth;
4. Link multicultural theory and practice;
5. Demonstrate problem solving ability;
6. Exhibit effective social interaction;
7. Communicate effectively in both oral and written presentations;
8. Demonstrate self-reflection.

The valued outcomes reflect the mission of Heritage College. The conceptual framework for planning, development, implementation and evaluation of the program is based on an empowerment model which relies on interdependence for success. The theoretical basis for this model is in the work of Freire (1972, 1985) and Giroux (1985, 1989) that suggests when individuals look critically at what they are doing and when they collaborate to find mutual understandings, they can act more dynamically to change education. Essential elements of the model are: inclusiveness, constructivist learning opportunities, and a willingness to utilize alternate forms of assessment.

The challenge for faculty is not to simply tell students what good planning, teaching, and evaluating is, but to demonstrate those strategies in every class. Added to this challenge is the willingness to share with students the opportunity to shape the learning experiences.

While the professional core of the M.Ed. in Professional Development may seem similar to other programs to create master teachers, the valued outcomes add distinctiveness and the vitality that

distinguish Heritage College graduates from other graduates.

Electives within the program are selected for each cadre of students based on needs assessments conducted with them at the outset. Personnel from the State Department of Education, regional service district area administrators, and teachers are consulted to determine special needs of the region to be served.

The graduate program targets the empowerment of teacher leaders (Goldring, 1995; McBride & Skau, 1995; Walling, 1994), so that the student, rather than the professor, becomes the center of information, planning, and assessment. Other programmatic foci are community building, constructivist learning theory, action research, and integrated curriculum based on utilizing diversity to strengthen the quality of shared products.

Graduate students often come to the program with an educational background rooted in teacher-centered, authoritarian experiences with individual competition the route to academic success. Initial experiences in Heritage College graduate classes are frequently confusing and frustrating at first to some. Students must deal with new expectations and responsibilities as learners. Ultimately, most find their learning experiences both liberating and exhilarating.

More specifically, students enter a program characterized by the following expectations:

- **In each course, students will become successful** in their learning tasks through cooperative decision making, shared knowledge, skills, and actions;
- Students will learn that **traditional views of intelligence are not blindly honored**. Intelligence becomes what you can do with what you have to work with. Multiple intelligences approaches require that interdependence is utilized so that the learning group can more successfully take advantage of the gifts of all within the group. Students experience the truth of, "We are all smarter than any one of us."
- Some students, in the course of their development within the program, will experience the pain of **disappointment when they depend on previously learned models of competition**. They are not rewarded for beating others or showing others as being inferior to themselves. The definition of "cheating" must be reexamined in light of newly acquired goals for interdependence and shared processes;
- Students may experience high levels of ambiguity in interpreting their assignments. **Planned ambiguity** encourages cooperative decision making and creativity in developing projects. Application of learning to the work environment is stressed, and students are seldom asked to find one, correct answer;
- **Resource development becomes a major activity** in most courses. Students learn how to network and form interdependent groups, enlarging their concepts of which resources are valuable to the task at hand, and where to locate them;
- **Leadership is redefined** so that it deviates from the traditional hierarchical model with its above/below orientation so that graduates become full, creative participants in a community. Students learn that one member absent or denied access diminishes the power

of the whole. Participants become valuable relative to their ability to add to the functions of the learning community;

- Leadership functions are often the result of **students becoming aware of how they are perceived differently** by their co-workers in the K-12 system as they progress through their programs of graduate study at Heritage College. They begin to display more the M.Ed. program's valued outcomes and to introduce innovations into their teaching due to increased self-confidence;
- Through their program, **students research, discuss, and make presentations** about key concepts such as valuing diversity, action research, constructivist learning, integrated curriculum, alternative assessment, and inclusiveness;
- Each **student becomes aware of a new persona**, one that is admired by their peers and colleagues. That new awareness becomes a powerful motivation to ongoing personal and professional change. Students discover that they have assumed the role of "model teacher" in their schools. Once they are accustomed to the rarefied air of a creative learning community in their graduate program, they search for it in their K-12 environs;
- The final comprehensive examination is based on an **alternative assessment model** (Baggett, 1994).Students may participate in an extensive portfolio assessment assembled during the two years of their program, a major field-based project or action research project, and/or the comprehensive exhibition. All of these assessments deal with the accumulation of understandings, skills, and relationship they have experienced in each learning community;
- At the program's end, they are expected to **demonstrate new behaviors** which positively affect their roles as teachers and citizens in their communities;
- In every case students are expected to **demonstrate the valued outcomes** of the program in their products. They also act as peer evaluators, supporters,and mentors to their peers within the program and to their professional colleagues in their work settings.

Members of learning communities, beginning within course structures, often maintain personal and professional relationships long after they receive their degrees. They find themselves changed people - proactive, inclusive, interdependent, and charismatically creative.

Ultimately, what prospective graduate students may view quite pragmatically as gaining additional expertise or, more mundanely, as a vehicle to acceleration on the salary scale becomes, by design, an internal journey of the heart. Not only the mind, but also the heart are engaged in the process of building a community of learners with strengthened positive values which cross cultural barriers and enhance the quality of life.

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